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HISTORIC HUTS

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HISTORIC HUTS

The story of the buildings erected and occupied
by early explorers in
the Ross Dependency
Antarctica

L. B. Quartermain

Information Officer, Antarctic Division, D.S.I.R.

Wellington, New Zealand

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H I S T O R I C H U T S

You are privileged to visit the old huts in McMurdo Sound where great men of the 'Heroic Age' of Antarctic exploration once lived. As you enter these huts, please remember that you are on historic ground and pay the reverence due to the memory of those who toiled, suffered and, some of them, died, to unlock the secrets of the Great White South.

It is desired that these huts should be preserved as nearly as possible in their original condition, as lasting memorials of these pioneer explorers of the Antarctic. We need hardly remind you then, that any defacement of these memorials, or any pilfering of 'souvenirs' from them, would be gross vandalism.

In case you are not familiar with the history of early exploration in the Antarctic, we should like to tell you a little about the story of these huts.

CAPE ADARE

The first men ever to sight the Victoria Land mountains and the peak of Erebus were the members of a British expedition under Sir James Clark Ross about 120 years ago. After forcing a passage through the pack-ice in his two small, but sturdy sailing vessels, the "Erebus" and the "Terror", Ross sighted the mainland of Antarctica near Cape Adare on January 11, 1841. A brief landing was made on one of the Possession Islands, and on January 28 Mt Erebus and the Barrier (now the Ross Ice Shelf) were discovered. Ross did not enter what he called McMurdo Bay, but coasted the ice-shelf for 300 miles to the east before returning to Tasmania for the winter. Next summer Ross succeeded in getting somewhat further to the east but ran into heavy weather in the pack and nearly lost both ships.

The Ross Sea was not again visited till, in January 1895, a Norwegian Whaling vessel, the 'Antarctic', penetrated the pack and got as far as 74°S. On the return a landing was made at Cape Adare, the first time men had ever set foot on the main mass of the Antarctic Continent.

C. E. Borchgrevink, who was on the "Antarctic" as a seaman, led a British party of ten men which wintered at Cape Adare in 1899, the first men ever to spend a winter on the Antarctic Continent. The huts they built and occupied are still standing. In the summer their ship, the "Southern Cross", reached the Ross Ice Shelf, and a short sledge journey was made across the 'Barrier' itself.

HUT POINT

On June 10, 1900, Captain Robert Falcon Scott, R.N., was appointed leader of the British "National Antarctic Expedition, 1901-1904". This was a major expedition, sponsored by the Royal Geographical Society and the Royal Society, and the personnel included five able scientists. A 700-ton vessel, the "Discovery", was specially built, and largely manned by Navy personnel. Leaving Lyttelton, New Zealand, on December 21, 1901, "Discovery" reached 'McMurdo Bay' a month later. Scott realised that the 'bay' was really a strait, and after a cruise along the edge of the 'Barrier' and the discovery of King Edward VII Land, he returned to what is now called 'McMurdo Sound' and on February 8, 1902, selected as his base site the southern side of a small point just north of Cape Armitage. Here a hut was built and the name 'Hut Point' was born. "Discovery" was frozen in about 200 yards from the hut and the whole company of over 40 men lived on the ship, using the hut for storage and other purposes.

A pioneer sledging party got into trouble during a blizzard. A sailor, George Vince, lost his footing and plunged to his death over the cliffs named Danger Slopes. You will see the cross erected by his ship-mates on Hut Point, close to the hut itself.

After the winter Scott, Dr Wilson and Lieut Shackleton made the first attempt to penetrate into the heart of the Antarctic. Leaving the ship on November 2, 1902, they dog-sledged across the ice-shelf for 59 days and covered 380 miles to the south. But by this time unsatisfactory food had rendered the dogs useless and the men themselves were smitten

with scurvy. On December 30 the three sick, hungry men turned back, and after a nightmare journey, during part of which Shackleton had to be drawn on a sledge by his companions, reached the ship on February 3, 1903.

The relief ship "Morning" found "Discovery" still solidly frozen in, and Scott with most of his men remained for a second winter. In the spring, P.O. Evans and Lashley made a great sledge journey up the Ferrar Glacier, a route that had been pioneered by Lieut Armitage the previous year, and for nearly 300 miles west across the plateau.

Two relief ships arrived on January 5, 1904. At the last minute "Discovery" broke free and the expedition reached Lyttelton on April 1, 1904, en route for home.

The old hut at Hut Point was destined to be used by later parties far more than it was used by its builders. Of this, more anon.

CAPE ROYDS

(Named after the First Lieutenant of the "Discovery")

Shackleton, nettled by his breakdown on the Southern Journey in 1902-03, was determined to lead his own expedition to the South. He left Lyttelton on the sealer "Nimrod" on New Year's Day, 1908. Shackleton had hoped to winter on the Ice Shelf, near where Little America was later established, but circumstances compelled him to return to McMurdo Sound. As the ice that year had not broken out to anything like the same extent as in 1902, "Nimrod" could not get nearer than about 20 miles to Hut Point, and the new hut was erected at Cape Royds. Fifteen men wintered here while the ship returned to New Zealand.

In the spring depots were laid as far as 100 miles south of Hut Point. On October 29, 1908, Shackleton, Wild, Adams and Marshall left Cape Royds on the main southern journey. No dogs were taken but four ponies were, all that were left of the fifteen originally shipped. Scott's farthest south was passed less than a month after the start, but by late November the coastal mountains, so long on their right, were showing up ahead of them and would clearly have to be crossed. The route taken was up the great 80-mile long Glacier, which Shackleton named the Beardmore. The sole remaining pony was lost down a crevasse, and on the plateau, still 300 miles from the Pole, food was so

reduced that the day's biggest meal consisted of three biscuits each, a piece of chocolate and a cup of cocoa. It was clearly useless to go on, and on January 9, 72 days out from Cape Royds and 97 miles from the Pole, they turned for home.

After a grim battle with starvation the four men covered the 800 miles to Hut Point in 50 days, and arrived at the hut the day before "Nimrod" was due to leave.

This southern journey was not only a record in length, 1600 miles in 177 days, but marked a greater advance towards the Pole, 367 miles, than that made by any other party.

Other notable exploits of Shackleton's expedition were the first ascent of Mt Erebus and the first journey by David, Mawson and Mackay to the South Magnetic Pole.

The expedition left Cape Royds for New Zealand on March 4, 1909.

CAPE EVANS

(First called "The Skuary". Later named after Lieut E.R.G.R. Evans, Scott's second-in-command in 1911-13)

Scott returned to the Antarctic in January, 1911, on the "Terra Nova" and was able to get as far as Cape Evans before the ship was blocked by ice. In this hut 25 men spent the winter of 1911. During the autumn a depot (One Ton Depot) was laid, 150 miles south of Hut Point, but 31 miles short of the distance south planned. The main southern journey began from Hut Point on November 3, 1911. Meanwhile Amundsen, the Norwegian, had left his base, Framheim, on the ice-shelf further to the east, a fortnight earlier. Scott used ponies, dogs and motor sledges in the early stages of his journey, but from the foot of the Beardmore Glacier the men hauled the sledges themselves. The last supporting party turned back 168 miles from the Pole, and Scott, Wilson, Bowers, Oates and P.O. Evans trudged on across the plateau. They reached the Pole on January 17, 1912; but Amundsen had arrived a month before. Dogged by hunger, disease and appalling climatic conditions, they struggled bravely back along the trail. Evans collapsed and died on the Glacier. Oates walked out to his death on March 16 to try and save the lives of his friends; and when only 11 miles from One Ton Depot a blizzard imprisoned the three survivors in their tent day after day. On March 29 Scott, the last to die, wrote painfully in his diary "It seems a pity but I do not think I can write more".

The three bodies were found by a search party on November 12, 1912.

It was from this Cape Evans hut that Wilson, Bowers and Cherry-Garrard had set out on June 27, in the depth of the 1911 winter, for Cape Crozier to study the embryology of the Emperor Penguin. They reached the rookery on July 14, set out on the return journey on the 25th, and arrived back at Cape Evans on August 2. This 134-mile ordeal was described by Scott as "the worst journey in the world".

The second (1912) winter saw a much smaller party of thirteen at Cape Evans. The southern party had not returned, and Campbell's party was also missing; the six men had to winter in an ice-cave, but survived. Nine men had returned to civilisation on the "Terra Nova" when she left for New Zealand on March 4, 1912.

As soon as possible in the spring, a search party set out for the south and on November 12, 1912, the tent and the bodies of Scott, Wilson and Bowers were found. Campbell's party made their own way to Hut Point and reached Cape Evans on November 7. On January 20-21, 1913, the cross was erected on Observation Hill in memory of Scott's southern party. Next day "Terra Nova" sailed for New Zealand.

The Depots Must be Laid

When Shackleton set out on his ill-fated "Endurance" expedition of 1914-17 to attempt the crossing of the Antarctic Continent, he set a party to McMurdo Sound to lay depots along the final stages of the proposed route, just as Hillary did in 1957-58.

The "Aurora" (Captain Mackintosh) reached Cape Evans on January 16, 1915. It was intended that the ship should winter here and she was moored by seven wire hawsers to anchors embedded in the gravel near the hut. At once parties set out to lay a depot at 80°S. Returning from this gruelling task, six men had to spend nine weeks at Hut Point before the sea ice was firm enough to enable them to reach Cape Evans on June 2. They then learnt the alarming news that "Aurora" had been blown out to sea during a blizzard on May 7, before provisions for themselves, sledging equipment and winter clothing had been put on shore. She had no hope of making her way back.

Ten men - including the ship's captain, Mackintosh - were thus stranded at Cape Evans for the winter, with none of the amenities which usually make wintering-over at least bearable. They did their best to contrive, from their own scanty supplies, and from what Scott's men had left in the hut, equipment for the longer and even more arduous depot-laying journeys in the spring. A journey to the hut at Cape Royds, seven miles away, augmented their food supplies but they were still desperately short of clothing and equipment when they began sledging stores to Hut Point early in September; wearing 'home-made' canvas trousers and 'boots' improvised out of old horse-rugs.

But the depots had to be laid. For all they knew, Shackleton might be already on his way. So leaving one man at Cape Evans to take observations, nine wretchedly equipped men set out on October 9 to stock the depot at Minna Bluff. This done, the main southern journey from Hut Point began on December 13. Three men were sent back on January 3 and the other six worked at first as two independent parties under Mackintosh and Joyce. Spencer-Smith was ill and on January 22 had to be left in one of the three-man tents, while five men crowded into the other. But they reached the foot of the Beardmore Glacier and established a depot at Mt Hope.

On the nightmare return journey Mackintosh and Hayward were both ill with scurvy. On February 18 there was only three days' food left, and a blizzard kept them in their tents for five days. So on February 23 Joyce, Richards and Hayward forced themselves on, with the four weak dogs, to the Bluff Depot, and returned with as much food as they could drag with them. The three invalids now had to be carried on the sledges. On March 7 Mackintosh volunteered to be left alone, and on March 9 Spencer-Smith, cheerful to the end, died. But two days later the other four, all scurvy stricken, staggered into Hut Point. Mackintosh was brought in, and the five survivors recovered their strength now that fresh seal-meat was available. But it was seal-meat and nothing else for the months that followed.

Mackintosh and Hayward left on May 8 for Cape Evans, but the ice was still thin, and they were never seen again. The remaining three made the journey safely on July 15. Except during October and November, when Joyce and two others spent some time at Cape Royds, the seven men occupied the Cape Evans hut and from here they were rescued by Shackleton himself in the "Aurora" on January 10, 1917. Before they left they set up the cross at Cape Evans in memory of the three men who died.

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The old huts were now left to the fury of the blizzards for nearly 40 years. Norwegian whalers worked in the Ross Sea during the nineteen-twenties, but have left no record of any penetration into McMurdo Sound. In February 1947 Admiral Cruzen and men of U.S. Operation Windmill paid a brief visit by helicopter to the hut sites; but it was not until Operation Deep Freeze I, in the summer of 1955-56, that men once more settled down to live on the bleak, but history-laden western shore of Ross Island.

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